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RR RUEHDBU
DE RUEHYE #0314/01 1321429
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 121429Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9028
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 1740
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000314

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/11/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [GG](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: ARMENIANS CONVEY GEORGIA CONCERNS TO VISITING
TBILISI AMBASSADOR

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Classified By: AMB. Marie L. Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: U.S. Ambassador to Georgia John Tefft met with the Armenian MFA and Armenia's top religious leader during a visit April 27 to discuss regional issues. Deputy Foreign Minister Shavarsh Kocharian emphasized Armenia's desire for good relations with Georgia, but also relayed Armenia's frustrations with Georgia over trade issues, regional policies, Georgia's Armenian minority, and disputes between the Armenian and Georgian churches. Armenian Catholicos Karekin II also raised the Armenian Church's difficult relationship with the Georgian Orthodox Church, while also taking the opportunity to complain at length to Ambassador Yovanovitch about the recent visit of an American religious choir. END SUMMARY

ARMENIAN CHURCH GRIEVANCES

¶2. (C) On April 27, U.S. Ambassador to Georgia John Tefft held consultations with the Armenian Foreign Ministry and the Catholicos of All Armenians, His Holiness Karekin II, accompanied by Ambassador Yovanovitch. He met first with the Catholicos, who was particularly wound up over the recent visit of the "Singing Men of Oklahoma" at the invitation of the Armenian Evangelical Church. The group's visit was marred by public controversy when an individual connected with the singing group posted to an internet website a promotional blurb about the trip which characterized the choir's visit as a proselytizing mission, and described Armenia as anti-Semitic and a formerly Christian country which had fallen into atheism. Despite repeated efforts by the group to disavow the internet posting, the Armenian Church was outraged, and the Catholicos vented his ire at some length. He specifically criticized the local Armenian Evangelical Church for, as he saw it, failing to correct the record and stand up for Armenian honor in the face of foreign slander. The Catholicos said he would provide Ambassador Yovanovitch with further information, and they could meet again to discuss the issue.

¶3. (C) The Catholicos went on to discuss the Armenian Church's frustration with the Georgian Orthodox Church's (GOC) alleged failure to engage substantively on several issues of mutual concern. The Armenian Church has long pressed to have a number of historic Armenian church buildings and properties restored to Armenian Church ownership. The Nurashen Church in Tbilisi, a primary source of the recent tension, was at the center of controversy after a Georgian priest began a construction project that endangered historic Armenian monuments at the site; a project which has since been stopped. The Armenian Church also resents its inability to register legally as a church denomination under Georgian law -- a problem it shares with other church denominations in Georgia.

FOREIGN MINISTRY CATALOG OF CONCERNS

14. (C) The Ambassadors were received at the Foreign Ministry by Deputy Foreign Minister Shavarsh Kocharian, CIS Department Director Ambassador Aram Grigorian, and Americas Department Director Armen Yeganian. DFM Kocharian emphasized the GOAM's strong desire to have a warm and productive relationship with Georgia. He noted that Armenia is heavily dependent on the trade route from Georgia's Black Sea ports to Armenia, as that and the less geographically favorable Iran connection are Armenia's only surface trade routes. Kocharian said that there are nonetheless a number of irritants in the bilateral Armenian-Georgian relationship that Yerevan has had difficulty resolving with Tbilisi.

15. (C) TRADE: Kocharian said Armenians perceive unfair treatment from Georgia on shipping costs. (NOTE: It was unclear from Kocharian's words whether he meant private sector or government officials. From other conversations in Yerevan, we have heard Armenians allege that the operators of the port facilities at Poti and Batumi are monopoly service providers with political connections, who gouge Armenian shippers. END NOTE) Kocharian asserted that Armenians receive less favorable transit costs than do Azerbaijani shipments. Kocharian noted, however, that overall Armenians' experience with trans-shipment through Georgia had improved dramatically since President Saakashvili came to power, as the GOG had dramatically reduced corruption, which significantly lowered transit costs as compared with Shevardnadze's times.

16. (C) REGIONAL ISSUES: Kocharian noted that Georgia routinely votes with Azerbaijan in various international fora

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regarding regional conflicts, effectively equating Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Kocharian commented that Armenia tries carefully to avoid making statements or actions that conflate NK with the Georgian separatist regions, but the Georgian government fails to return this favor, instead making common cause with Azerbaijan on the issue with such votes. Kocharian expressed the GOAM's objections to the fact that Georgia participates in regional infrastructure projects aimed specifically at excluding Armenia, specifically the Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan railroad project. Kocharian commented that there is a perfectly good railroad connection between Kars (Turkey) and Gyumri (Armenia) which inter-connects onward to Georgia and thence to Azerbaijan, so to invest in an alternative to go around Armenia is unfortunate. He expressed some understanding, however, that Georgia is simply looking out for its own interests by dealing with the reality of the anti-Armenian policies of Turkey and Azerbaijan.

17. (C) SAMSTKHE-JAVAKHETI (S-J): Kocharian also mentioned common Armenian concerns pertaining to the ethnic-Armenian Georgian minority region of S-J (more commonly called simply Javakh in Armenia). He commented that Georgian-Armenians in S-J feel discriminated against, and also that their socio-economic situation is unfavorable. Kocharian noted that some Armenians in S-J and elsewhere are beginning to believe that autonomy would be the only option. He opined that Armenian should have the status of a second official language in Georgia, and that Georgia has additional obligations to provide for the minority region in line with European Union precedents. Ambassador Tefft noted that he had just visited S-J, that his embassy visits the region often, and he himself meets frequently with the Armenian Archbishop in Tbilisi and the ethnic Armenian deputy foreign minister Nalbandov, who is a powerful advocate within the GOG for Javakh Armenians. Ambassador Tefft relayed his belief that Saakashvili's government had done more for the ethnic minority regions than any previous Georgian government, and that Javakh Armenians acknowledge and appreciate those

efforts. Tefft also noted that one third of Georgia's Millennium Challenge money is being spent in S-J, as the USG wants to support all ethnic groups in Georgia.

18. (C) CHURCH DISPUTES: Kocharian also raised the package of disputes between the Armenian and Georgian churches, echoing the points raised by the Catholicos about the Nurashen Church, other disputed church properties, and the problem of lack of registration of the Armenian Church. Kocharian noted that the Georgian priest responsible for the specific problems with the Nurashen Church had been removed, but expressed disappointment that the priest had not been criminally charged for vandalism, destruction of cultural artifacts, or inciting racial hatred. Ambassador Tefft noted that U.S. Embassy Tbilisi had made every effort to help broker resolution of the Nurashen Church issue.

YOVANOVITCH